

## MADURAI SHANMUKHAVADIVU SUBBULAKSHMI

Gouri R.

Her head rests on a down-turned basket on the floor. Her thick, incredibly curly hair is spread over it after the customary oil bath. As the incense fumes rise from the live coals under the basket, the black waves seem endless and enchanting. The face they frame turns ethereal. Diamond sparks from ear and nose intensify the fragrant dream.

When she rises from cloudy repose, she knots her hair, tucks jasmine flowers into its folds, sits before the gods in the puja room, and sings with her eyes closed, slender fingers gliding over the tanpura. I become even more convinced that grandaunt Kunjamma is a celestial being. How else could she be so radiantly beautiful? So gentle and sweet? Or move with such grace? How else could she make music which thrilled you all over?

At that time, I was too young to realize that she was the idol of hundreds of thousands as the celebrated musician M.S. Subbulakshmi. But I did know the legends of goddesses who came to earth on special missions. Now in my adulthood, stripped of childish fancies and credulous faith, I am still unable to shake off that adoration. I certainly see it reflected in the sea of faces in the concert hall, looking up at the lady on the dais. To them, she is not merely a performer, not even a saintly singer. She is goddess incarnate. It is not human art but divine grace which manifests itself through her voice.

That voice has been rated peerless from the shy days of her debut when it soared like the high-pitched notes of a bird in springtime. Later, the ravishing trills were weighted with the stately grandeur and sonorous devotion of the classical tradition. Few other artists have been as successful as Subbulakshmi in the melding of the conscious and the unconscious, the inborn and the reflective elements of her art.

She plumbs the depths and scales the heights of the raga, dwelling resoundingly on the *gandhara* of the upper register, circling it with phrases pure and brilliant. She may drown you in hymnal fervour as she repeats the line '*Ojagajanani, manonmani, omkara rupini, kalyani*'... The listener is lost in a trance. He doesn't realize that the ecstasy is founded on technical mastery, marathon training and phenomenal control. Perhaps this was at the back of his mind when the Hindustani maestro Bade Ghulam Ali Khan called her 'Suswaralakshmi, Subhalakshmi'.

And if you pay attention to anything she sings from her vast, still-increasing repertoire in many languages and in several musical forms, from Telugu *kriti* (song) to Marathi *abhang* (devotional song), you can see how much diction, breath control and thoughtful modulation contribute to the transcendence which characterizes her music. Meticulousness is a constant factor in everything she does. Her unquestioning faith in God is equalled by her unflinching commitment to her art.

National and international leaders, fellow artists and celebrities from every walk of life rank among her admirers. For an artist who has never given a single interview, letting her music speak for itself, Subbulakshmi has received unprecedented press coverage. The public adulation is evoked not only for her music but for the other worldly qualities she

represents. Indian thought identifies these with the *Bhakti* tradition where art is only a vehicle for seeking and finding God.

It is well known that shortly before his assassination, Mahatma Gandhi requested M.S. Subbulakshmi to record his favourite *bhajan* for him. She did not know that song. But how could she not learn it for him when Bapu said he would rather hear her *speak* the song than someone else *sing* it?

More and more of her fans tell her that listening to her songs, live or recorded, has brought them good fortune, averted mishaps, replaced physical or mental ailments with peace of mind. I cannot forget a dear friend who repeatedly asked me to sing any 'M.S.' music as she faced death from third-degree burns.

In real life, Subbulakshmi is an extremely traditional and conservative woman of her generation. She is quite unaware of the trails she has blazed, or her pioneering achievements. She was the first woman recipient of the 'Sangita Kalanidhi' title (1968) from the Music Academy, Madras. She is perhaps the only Carnatic musician who is popular in north India. And it was she who introduced the splendours of Carnatic music to the West at the Edinburgh Festival (1963) and at the United Nations (1966). With husband Thiagarajan Sadasivam to guide her, M.S. Subbulakshmi has raised over three crores of rupees for charity through her concerts.

Other quiet revolutions include playing the male role of Narada in the film *Savitri* (1941). This was to raise money for launching *Kalki*, her husband's nationalist Tamil weekly.

Her title role of the Rajasthani saint-poetess Meera in the film of that name (1947) gave her national prominence.

Cult figure and consummate artist that she is, Subbulakshmi continues to give concerts at age eighty. She can still hit the *gandhara* in the upper octave and make you soar with her.

Yes, grandaunt Kunjamma is an inspiring role model, not only for the miracle of her music, but because she represents in her simple, everyday life, the values of an ancient culture: humility, compassion, consideration for others and unwavering principles of conduct. Her quest for perfection, sincerity of effort and concentration are not reserved for the stage. They are visible in the camphor light that she circles around the gods and gurus in her puja room. That is why she fills you with the same rapture when she sings a prayer at home, as she does on the concert stage with her eyes-closed finale '*Kumi onrum illai*'— 'Lord, I have no regrets'.

### SONGBIRD IN SPRINGTIME

Grandmothers are best at telling stories about things which happened once upon a time, long, long ago. I too am a grandmother now, and I would like to begin with a story.

Once upon a time, long, long ago, King Malayadhvaja ruled over the Pandya Empire which spread across the land of the Tamils. His capital was Madurai, city of temples and towers, in the deep south of India. The king had everything his heart could desire. But he had no child to make him happy. Therefore, on the advice of holy men, he performed a great *yagna* to the gods.

As the priests chanted the Vedas, and poured ghee into the fire, a little girl rose from the golden blaze. She was as beautiful as the full moon shining in the starry sky. That is how the goddess came to Madurai as a human child. The delighted king named her Minakshi.

When she grew up, Princess Minakshi decided to expand the Pandya Empire. Gathering an army as vast as the oceans, she set out on a war of conquest. Wherever she went, she was victorious.

Finally, the princess reached the Himalayas. She decided to storm Mount Kailasa, the home of Lord Siva. But when Minakshi looked at the god in all his glory, the arrow dropped from her hand. Siva too was overwhelmed by Minakshi's beauty.

However, it was not in the Himalayas but down in Madurai that their marriage was celebrated. To win Minakshi, Siva had to give up his snakes and ashes. He came dressed in gold and silks as the handsome Sundaresvara, a fit groom for the Pandya princess!

So now you know that Madurai, my home town, is no ordinary place!

As a child I was often taken to see the puja at the Minakshi temple. I remember gazing at the splendid image in the inner chamber. When the priest circled burning camphor round her face, I could see the beautiful eyes of the goddess. They were full of love, full of sweet blessings. So you see, faith and prayer came to me in childhood. It was part of the way I was brought up.

Eater, when I became a concert singer, I would sometimes sing in praise of Minakshi. When I repeated the line '*Madurapuri nilaye...*' which described her as the deity of Madurai town, I would always remember the long and lovely eyes of the goddess which had thrilled me as a child.

I spent my childhood in a tiny house wedged between a row of tightly packed houses. This was in Hanumantharayan Street, very close to the Minakshi temple. Oh yes, it is still there! The street is just as narrow, dusty and crowded now as it was in those days. The little lane was often occupied by cows which refused to budge. Certainly no cars could get by. The cows would sit comfortably and chew on, pretending not to hear the shouts and the honks.

But it was a special place for musicians because of my mother, Shanmukhavadiyu. She played the veena. It is an ancient musical instrument. In paintings and temple carvings you will see it in the hands of Goddess Saraswati. The tone of the veena is both rich and sweet. It is supposed to calm the mind, and bring good thoughts. I know this is true because that is how I felt when my mother practised and performed on the stage.

The initials before my name stand for the two influences on my life—M for my hometown Madurai, and S for my mother Shanmukhavadiyu. She was my first guru. It was she who made me the singer I am today.

We were poor, but rich in music. I was brought up with music all around me. Singing came more naturally to me than talking. I was a timid child. Mother's strict discipline made me even more silent. Mother wouldn't let me or my sister Vadivambal step out of the house unnecessarily. In fact she didn't like it if we stood too long near the front door, or looked out of the window. My brother Saktivel had a little more freedom because he

was a boy. We girls had to be satisfied with indoor games. With these restrictions how could I make friends?

Our home was very small—two rooms, a kitchen and a courtyard. A staircase went up to the terrace on top. Our house was always packed with elderly aunts and uncles who were often sick. We had to be quieter then. Our life was simple and frugal. We had coriander coffee in the morning—made by boiling roasted coriander seeds to which a dash of milk and jaggery were added. We had rice and buttermilk at night. I was very fond of jasmines. But we couldn't afford to buy flowers everyday. And candy PVadiva and I would pound tamarind, chillies and salt together, roll it into little balls and put a stick through each one. There was our lollipop!

I never felt we lacked things. Didn't we have each other? Learning music was fun because we three children learnt and practised together. I would sing, Vadiva would play the veena and brother Saktivel would make the room echo with his mridangam. His drumming was so good that I actually learnt to play the mridangam from him. We would laugh and talk as we practised. But mother's footsteps were enough to make us fall silent. She did not tolerate distractions of that sort.

When I was a child, television was of course a thing of the distant future. Films were few and something to talk about with open-mouthed wonder. I never saw any.

In those days there was a popular art form called *harikatha*, which drew the evening crowds to a temple courtyard or marriage pandal. A narrator called the *Bhagavatar* held the listeners spellbound with legends and epics. These tellers of tales were linguists and scholars who knew verses from many languages—Tamil, Sanskrit, Telugu, Hindi and Marathi. This made their stories more fascinating, especially as they set the verses to music and sang soulfully. Some of the Bhagavats were such experts in music that professional musicians came to hear them.

Harikatha was usually performed by men, but there were a few women who excelled in the art. Saraswati Bai was a famous 'star' among them. Like the many artists of those times, she was deeply influenced by Mahatma Gandhi. She became a supporter of the Indian National Congress, and spoke eloquently about the campaigns it launched to free India from British rule.

Once I was taken to hear Saraswati Bai. That day her discourse described the gathering of Rama's army of monkeys on the sea shore. Suddenly Ravana's brother Vibhishana appeared in the sky, fleeing from Lanka to surrender himself to Rama. Bai painted the whole scene with a rousing fervour. And then she burst into a song in Raga Khamas, in Adi tala (a time cycle of eight beats). Most unexpectedly, it was in English! This is the occasion, for our liberation. This is Congress Resolution, Gandhiji's inspiration.

It was a terrific blast which rose to a crescendo with the crash of drums, chipla bells and cymbals. Perhaps the lady thought she had to sing in English to make the British understand and tremble!

After the last note of the ringing challenge, Saraswati Bai thundered in Tamil prose: 'And that is how Vibhishana fell from the sky, at the feet of the Lord!' And that is when I felt my mother's sharp pinch, admonishing me to stop giggling and behave—or else...!

I began to read and write before I was sent to school. This happened in a very strange manner. As a child I would get up very early and stand outside the doorway, watching women cleaning the doorstep. They would sprinkle water on the patch of the street in front of their homes, smear cow dung over it and begin to draw the most beautiful designs with rice flour. These were called *kolam*.

One day an old man walked down the street and passed me by. He wore a saffron dhoti and ash marks on forehead and arms, a *rudraksha* round his neck. He carried a bronze jug, the *kamandala*. I don't know why, but I liked him on sight. He looked pious and kind-hearted. I continued to see him everyday after that—fresh from his bath, with the same sweet smile for me.

One day he stopped. 'Child, I want to teach you. Will you learn?' he asked. I nodded happily. He promptly sat down on the doorstep. He closed his eyes, folded his hands (I did the same) and began with a *shloka*, 'Ghrita guda payasam

What do you think he taught me? Not Sanskrit, the language of the scriptures. Not Tamil, my mother tongue. He taught me a script called Grantha—so old that nobody uses it anymore. You can find it only in old books, and on the walls of temples. Or on copper plates which were used in olden days to keep accounts and records!

My family watched these 'classes' with astonishment. Perhaps they were amused by this white-haired man teaching a tiny tot like me. But no one stopped us. In those days, old and learned persons were respected, even if they were poor wandering souls. But Vadiva and Sakti found it impossible not to laugh when they saw him. They teased me dreadfully. Sakti started referring to him as 'Old dhritakula payasam', after the funny sounding prayer he recited each day. But we continued our classes till the old man went back to Benares, from where he had come south on a pilgrimage. That is how an old man whose name I never knew, became my first guru, and Grantha the first script I learnt!

After this I was sent to a proper school where I studied up to class five. I might have continued but for a severe beating I got from a teacher, for no reason I could understand. The fright made my whooping cough so much worse that my elders at home decided to stop my schooling.

Did I miss school? Not really. I was scared of my teachers and classmates. Staying at home was a relief.

But you must not think my education was over. There was so much to learn from my own mother. Actually, though I always think of her as my first guru, she never sat down and taught me music. It was more a matter of picking up as she practised and taught students, and singing with her as she played the veena.

My mother chose a music teacher for me. This was Srinivasa Iyengar who gave concerts with his brother. On an auspicious day and hour, a small puja was done at home; a coconut was cracked and offered in worship. I prostrated myself before my guru and my mother. Then I sat down on the mat for my first lesson. My guru checked the tambura strings. They were correctly tuned. He began to pluck them. He sang out loud and clear: 'Sa ri ga ma pa dha ni sa . . .', I repeated the notes after him in three speeds. I must have done well because he taught me with great interest. He laid a proper foundation by going through the beginner's exercises—*sarali varisai*, *alankaram* and *gitam*. Sadly, he did not live to guide me for long. He went out of town on some work. Soon after we heard that

he had passed way. This was unfortunate. But it did not end my fascination for music. I practised for long hours and with great involvement. I made up a sort of game for myself. I would tune the tambura carefully. As I plucked the strings, the resonance would cast a spell over me. Eyes closed, I would be lost in another world. Then I would stop, sing without it, and pluck the strings again to check if I had stayed in tune. Throughout the day, in between household jobs, I would return to the tambura several times to see if I could recall that pitch steadily and accurately.

Singing on stage happened so naturally that it seemed to be the only thing for me. You will laugh when you hear how I 'appeared before the public' for the first time.

My mother gave a concert at the Setupati School near our home. I was building mud palaces in the backyard when somebody, perhaps my uncle, picked me up, dusted my skirt, washed my hands, and carried me straight to the stage. There were some fifty listeners in the hall. In those days it was quite a large gathering! But I was used to seeing my mother play before people. I was put down next to her. My mother asked me to sing. At once, without the least hesitation, I sang one or two songs. I was too young for the smiles and applause to mean much. In fact, I was wondering how soon I could get back to making mud pies!

My love of music was fanned by the atmosphere in our house. My mother didn't take me to too many concerts by other musicians. But they often came to our house. Great musicians like Karaikudi Sambasiva Iyer, Mazhavarayanendal Subbarama Bhagavata and Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar would drop in. Their names may sound difficult to you, but their music was like mountain honey. Pure and sweet.

These artists would sit down, drink coffee, roll *paan* and tuck it into their cheek, or take a pinch of snuff, and talk endlessly about great music and musicians. One story I heard at that time left its mark on me.

Once a famous musician was scheduled to sing, after a talented youngster. The young man gave a superb performance. With tears in his eyes, the senior musician got up and blessed him. To the organizers he said, 'The young man's music has rained sugar and honey today. I am deeply moved. I can't sing now. Let me come back and sing for everyone tomorrow.' Do you see the large heartedness of the man? Do you see how humble he was? His love of music went beyond thoughts of himself.

The musicians who visited us would often sing or play their instruments. A nod from my mother was like loud applause to them. Sometimes she would pluck the strings and play, and they would listen eagerly. Sometimes these maestros would ask me to sing. They would teach me a song or two. In those days praise was not scattered easily. A nod meant tremendous approval. 'You must do well' meant we had reached a high standard.

Local musicians too would come home to pay their respects to mother. Whenever the temple deity was taken out in procession through the main streets, the nadaswaram players, at the head of the line, would stop where our little street branched off. Then they would play their best for mother. I would run out and watch. I would be entranced by the sights and sounds. The gods were gorgeously bedecked in silks and jewels and flowers. There was chanting. And the majestic melody of the nadaswaram pipes rose with the big *tavil* drums. That kind of music is perhaps gone forever. Veena players were always

anxious to impress mother. Once, when such a musician came home, somehow Sakti and I guessed that he would be quite awful. And we were right.

The veena is a delicate instrument. It has to be plucked and stroked gently. But this man pulled and grabbed and pushed and banged. What made it worse was that he had chosen to play an old, soulful raga called Sahana. And he chose to repeat the words, '*Rakshasa Bhima*.' You know what it means! Just imagine listening to a noisy player repeating the words, 'a gigantic demon'. I choked as I stifled my giggles. Vadiva arid Sakti were just as bad. Mother glared icily at us. But how could we stop laughing, especially when, at an explosive twang, the string broke and curled up with a squeak!

At another time we had a musician who played the jalatarangam for us (*jal* means water and *tarangam* mean wave). The instrument consists of a set of china bowls, each filled with a different level of water. The player taps the bowls with two sticks and there you have it—water music! It is like the tinkling of little bells.

I also listened to a lot of music on the radio. We didn't own one, but if I sat by the window halfway up the staircase, I could hear our neighbour's radio clearly. That is how I got introduced to Hindustani music. How enchanting it was to hear Abdul Karim Khan, Amir Khan or Paluskar, their voices sweetened by the silence of the night.

Hindustani music was not unknown to us in the south. The Maratha kings who had ruled over Tanjavur had made it popular among music lovers. I learnt Hindustani music for a while from Pandit Narayan Rao Vyas. This was to help me a lot when I grew up and acted in the film Meera. Then I had the privilege of singing Meerabai's songs. '*Shyama Sundara Madana Mohana* was one of the songs that Pandit Vyas taught me. It was to become a hit when I sang it in *Seva Sadan*—a film based on Munshi Premchand's novel.

Living a sheltered life as I did, what could I know of fashions? The only 'cosmetics' I had were turmeric powder and grain flour. There was *kajal* for the eyes and *chaandu*—red and black paste stored in coconut shells, with which we made dots on the forehead. And of course coconut oil. Mother used to get quite tired as she rubbed oil into my hair on Tuesdays and Fridays. Then she would spread my hair out on the stone where we washed our clothes, and wash it with *shikakai*. My hair was long and thick and extremely curly. I smile when I see the corkscrew curls in my old photographs!

From the staircase window, I would watch the world outside. That is how I saw the girls in the opposite house getting ready to go out. They were dabbing something on their faces which made them white. Of course I didn't know it was face powder. I rubbed my hands along the whitewashed wall and tried the effect on my face. You can imagine how irritated my mother was when she caught me at it. Her 'Don't be stupid!' came with a slap.

I must tell you that street sounds were very different then from what you hear now. There was much less noise. Many more hawkers and vendors came by. They sold all kinds of goods, from vegetables to bangles. Then there was the man with the performing monkey; the snake charmer with his small pipe called magudi which played an eerie tune; the 'Govinda' man who rolled across the street in yellow robes, as he collected alms to go to the Tirupati temple; the 'bhoom-bhoom maadu' or the bull which told fortunes... each had his own way of singing and reciting. I remember the songs of the beggars. Never film

songs but catchy folk tunes. The beggar who made nightly rounds used to sing a haunting Hindustani tune!

I was also fascinated by records—gramophone ‘plates’ we called them. Inspired by the gramophone company’s logo of the dog listening to his master’s voice, I would pick up a sheet of paper; roll it into a long cone, and sing into it for hours. This dream came true sooner than I expected when my mother took me to Madras to cut my first disc. I was ten years old and sang in an impossibly high pitch!

I lost my father at about the same time. He was a lawyer. His heart was not in the court, but in his puja room with Sri Rama. Every year he would celebrate the Rama Navami festival with great love and care. The picture of Rama, decorated beautifully with flowers, would be taken through the streets in a grand procession. This was on the *saarattu*, an open, horse-drawn buggy. How proud I felt when father picked me up and made me sit with him on that *saarattu*! After the rounds the picture would be carefully taken into the house, and after the puja, father would lead the group singing of bhajans. Then came what all the children waited for: the distribution of *Prasad*!

As a child I had a pet name. Everyone called me Kunjamma which meant ‘little girl’. But my father had another special name for me. It was always ‘Kajaathi, my little princess!’ He was very proud of my singing. He would say that he would get me married only to someone who would cherish my music. Then he would laugh and tease, ‘So how about a nice boy who plays the tambura? Do you fancy such a husband?’

I have one more green memory to share. Dakshinamurti Pillai was an awe-inspiring musician of those times. He played the mridangam and the ghatam. A wedding in his family drew a whole galaxy of musicians. Young and old, they came to his hometown Pudukkottai, not only to attend the function, but also to perform their best before the veteran, I was a young girl then, but I was given the chance to sing in that assembly. The next day, as we took leave of him, Pillai made us sit down. He turned to his fellow musicians, many of them top performers of the time. He said, ‘You heard this child yesterday. No fuss, no show, no fireworks. Didn’t she sing straight from the heart and give us excellent, wholesome music? That is the kind of music which will always stay fresh, and last through a lifetime.’

I was so overcome by these words that I shrank behind mother and tried to turn invisible. But he called me forward and gave his blessings.

Right from childhood, just as I felt devotion towards God, I felt a deep respect for my elders. Whenever something good happened, I believed it was due to their good wishes. And I must say that right through my life I was lucky to get their blessings.

My first important performance as a singer was at the Music Academy in Madras. It was to be a full-fledged, three-hour concert there before an audience of musicians, critics and music lovers. I was eighteen. I shivered and trembled before the event. Trying not to look at the listeners, I went up to the stage, sat down, checked the tuning of the tambura, and began.

Suddenly, my fears fell away. I sang with joy. Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavatar, a well-known singer, had been sitting at the back. He got up and came to the front row, loudly expressing his approval. Others too were quick to say ‘*Bhesh! Bhesh!*’ and



*'Shabhash!* I treasure the words of the great veena player Sambasiva Iyer. He said, 'Subbulakshmi? Why, she carries a veena in her throat!'

That concert at the Music Academy was a very big step for me—a step towards a lifetime of singing. And of devotion and service through that pursuit of music.